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Artistry More Than Entertainment

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Artistry More than Entertainment

Brandon Best

After seeing the final edit, producers realized that *Letters to Father Jacob*, directed by Klaus Härö, had potential to be greater than merely a made for television film. The film won over a dozen awards at various international film festivals and was nominated for seven more. *Letters to Father Jacob* was ultimately chosen to be Finland's 2009 Oscar submission. Despite its many awards and nominations, the spiritual and philosophical themes did not resonate with some critics. While both N.W. Douglas and Jeanette Catsoulis recognize the aesthetic beauty of *Letters to Father Jacob*, Douglas' review more thoroughly analyzes the film's philosophy of forgiveness.

Douglas and Catsoulis' reviews both laud the cinematography. Catsoulis says that the movie "transforms a picture-postcard location and odd-couple narrative into a pretty, and pretty predictable, snooze." Father Jacob's abode is picturesque: the woods are quiet and prayerful, the wetlands are natural and beautiful, and Father Jacob's home is as antique as he is. Though she sees the end result of the cinematography, she does not see the purpose of the visual perspective beyond its being delightful to see. Douglas, however, recognizes the visual style as an artistic medium fitted to portray the message of the film. Douglas writes of the camera work, "Cinematographer Tuomo Hutri paints each frame with natural light, giving indoor scenes an expressive mood that captures the inner struggles of both." Douglas sees how the visual perspective interacts with the characters and their emotional tone. Early in the film Leila often gravitates towards the darker areas of the room. During pivotal, thoughtful scenes Leila and Jacob's faces have shaded and lit halves. Douglas even describes the history of this style of cinematography. He says "The use of daylight to penetrate dark and musty rooms evokes the memory of Swedish master Ingmar Bergman," who was known for his moody themes and spiritual dramas. *Letters to Father Jacob's* stark, dynamic images

match the stark and dynamic emotions of Leila and Father Jacob. Douglas recognizes the intentionality behind how the characters are seen aesthetically, while Catsoulis only sees the camera angles and set as well done.

Douglas and Catsoulis also both commend the actors' skill, but Douglas describes the artfulness of acting beyond mere entertainment. Catsoulis praises, "[T]he acting is flawless, the tone gentle and observational." She appreciates that Leila's transformation is unforced and without a sermon. To Douglas, Leila's subdued obstinacy and Father Jacob's soft, brimming love go beyond acting for mere entertainment. The acting becomes art by its own merit. Douglas describes Father Jacob's plight as "a dance between joy and sorrow, and he walks that tightrope without ever falling completely to one side, or into some sort of generic bittersweet caricature." Douglas sees how well Heikki Nousiainen, who plays Father Jacob, avoids becoming an unbelievable or sentimental character by never completely surrendering to grief or love. Douglas says the same of Leila: "Hazard's stony performance as Leila follows a similar pattern; her grim, silent close-ups betray little emotion, but still express a sense of her inner anguish. When her barriers begin to fall, the sparseness of her earlier scenes pays off in a big way." Douglas recognizes the intentionality behind Leila's acting as it leads to the climax— her early reservedness makes her later openness more dramatic. To Douglas, good story and good acting cannot be separated. The actor's storytelling will either ruin a plot or give it life.

Catsoulis and Douglas strongly disagree, however, on whether the plot is clichéd or worthy of investigation psychologically and philosophically. Catsoulis denounces the plot as clichéd, while Douglas investigates Leila's redemption on an intellectual level. Catsoulis labels *Letters to Father Jacob* as a "redemption-driven drama" and says the narrative induces sleep. While this film is redemption-driven, most stories seek redemption. Catsoulis is unclear what she means by calling the movie a "redemption-driven drama." She again vaguely castigates *Letters to Father Jacob* as "pretty predictable" without additional comment. Her labels do little to enlighten the reader nor do they explore the movie as a work of art. Douglas vivisections the plot more deeply and appreciates the movie's

exploration of grief, love, and forgiveness. He explains “*Letters to Father Jacob* is a parable of grace—grace that is unstoppable, finding its way in through the cracks, whispering and guiding, and finally, smashing down walls of hurt and shame.” Douglas does not see *Letters to Father Jacob* as a feel good movie; he recognizes the emotional war between guilt and forgiveness raging inside of Leila and Father Jacob. He empathizes with Leila’s “hard-nosed” attitude and Jacob’s blindness by trying to understand their feelings of shame, want of acceptance, and need for love. Douglas investigates both the characters with depth. He analyzes Leila’s obstinacy and Jacob’s delicacy with objectivity as he considers the perspectives of Leila, Jacob, and the viewer. Douglas’ greater empathy for *Letters to Father Jacob* outdoes Catsoulis in perceiving the plot’s and character’s depth.

Douglas investigates Leila’s transformation from resentment to acceptance, seeing what Härö intended to communicate about the power of forgiveness; Catsoulis seems to care only about entertainment value. Catsoulis ends her review saying, “Anyone looking to kill 74 minutes between the early-bird special and bingo could do a great deal worse.” Catsoulis implies that *Letters to Father Jacob* is average at best and is meant for the sentimental and elderly. Her review barely dips into the sea of meaning Douglas finds in the movie. Douglas is open-minded to the movie message saying, “The film is rich in themes of forgiveness, of sharing burdens, and of letting go of ravenous guilt.” By analyzing the plot and characters, Douglas has a meaningful thoughts to share on the themes of overcoming guilt and accepting forgiveness. He also takes what Härö has to say about themes of faith of faith and forgiveness into account. Härö says he “hoped to make a film that would portray faith in a warm and genuine manner. I wanted to tell about us, the average people, in need of mercy and forgiveness for our daily shortcomings.” Douglas’ open-minded examination of the art of film leads to him articulating meaningful thoughts on Leila’s transition from resentment to forgiveness and Härö’s intentions for *Letters to Father Jacob*.

Despite their initial concurrence on *Letters to Father Jacob*’s aesthetic cinematography and acting, Catsoulis and Douglas do not

agree on much else. Although Catsoulis and Douglas both praise the surface beauty of *Letters to Father Jacob*, Douglas' review sees the movie as an intellectual work and analyzes the themes and character motivations philosophically. Unlike Catsoulis' vague review, Douglas' recognizes the intentionality of the cinematography, acting, and plot of *Letters to Father Jacob*.

Bibliography

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